

fall into neither form of vulgarity. It may be, however, no more than a reasonable comment that the argument for John's independence of the synoptic gospels owes some of its popularity to the fact that it makes possible (though not necessary) an early date for the Fourth Gospel, and suggests a higher estimate of its worth as a historical source. If the traditional date of the gospel is correct one

wonders where the evangelist can have lived if indeed he knew none of the earlier gospels; and if his book is rightly regarded as essentially a theological variation on a historical theme it is natural rather than difficult to believe that he had read at least Mark, and had pondered—and understood—its meaning.

Ethical Standards in World Religions:

VII. The Sikhs

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A CONSIDERATION of Sikh ethics must immediately raise the classic paradox of Sikh history. At its beginning stands the first Master, Guru Nanak (1469–1539), one distinguished by a stress on interior devotion and the renunciation of all externals in religious observance. Four and a half centuries later, we see a community noted for its distinctive appearance, its rigorous code of behaviour, and its considerable reputation for martial conduct and general tenacity of purpose. Many of the features which distinguish the Sikh community of to-day from the first disciples of Nanak are properly regarded as ethical issues. For this reason it is necessary to preface any description of the contemporary Sikh ethic with an examination of Nanak's own ethical teachings and a brief survey of the community's history from his time to the present day. The intention of this preliminary survey is to indicate the actual roots of the modern ethic and to demonstrate that it is essentially consistent with the original teachings of Nanak. The paradox is, in other words, apparent rather than real.

The same problem can be approached in a different way by examining the sources for any treatment of Sikh ethics. As in all aspects of Sikh religion the obvious source is the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, the sacred scripture compiled by the fifth Guru in 1603–04. The *Gurū Granth Sāhib* communicates little impression of the outward features so characteristic of the modern Sikh and one will look in vain for mandatory instructions concerning uncut hair, turbans, and daggers. It does, however, provide the essential foundation for Sikh ethics and it does so precisely because it incorporates the works of Guru Nanak and his immediate successors.

It is upon this foundation that the Sikh community has built its unique and intensely interesting structure of ethical belief. Three general sources can be cited for the developments which

eventually produce the distinctive Sikh system. The first is the native tradition of the Punjab; the second is the constituency of the early community; and the third is the impact of its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century experience, particularly in terms of its conflicts with Mughal authority and Afghan invader. To these we may also add the influence of western contacts within India, but we should misrepresent this late influence were we to elevate it to the same status as the first three.

The general sources eventually produce systematic statements which emerge in documentary form during the eighteenth century. Each of these statements is known as a *rahit-nāmā* (plural *rahit-nāme*), or 'code of conduct'. Several appeared during the course of the eighteenth century. They then receded for several decades, to reappear with the Singh Sabha reformation towards the end of the nineteenth century. There exists to-day a standard version known as the *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* and it is on this version that we shall base our description of contemporary Sikh ethics. An English translation of this code is now available under the title *A Guide to the Sikh Way of Life* (see 'Further Reading') and is strongly recommended to all who seek a brief statement of ethical ideals as understood and promulgated by orthodox Sikhs.

The expression 'orthodox' is warranted in this context, notwithstanding the fact that many who still call themselves Sikhs openly violate some of the cardinal precepts (particularly those who live outside India). There can be no question that the pattern of life and observance specified in the *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* is still regarded as a normative ideal and that those who deviate from it are to that extent transgressors of orthodox standards. The only significant exception to this rule are the so-called *sahaj-dhārī* Sikhs, those who venerate the Gurus but who have never assumed the outward insignia of the orthodox.

The ethical aspect of Guru Nanak's teachings

can be conveniently introduced with two brief quotations from his works, both of them couplets extensively quoted by Sikhs. Both are difficult to translate adequately in that the English terminology which must necessarily be used inevitably distorts in some measure the meaning intended by Nanak. The first couplet, an extract from the first stanza of Nanak's *Japji*, is one of the best-known quotations from the entire scripture.

How is Truth to be attained, how the
veil of falsehood torn aside?
Nanak, thus it is written: submit to
the divine Order, walk in its way.¹

The second is likewise a considerable favourite, particularly its final line.

The soul lies in bondage, the Guru reveals
the door of salvation.
Truth is the highest of all principles, yet
higher still is living in accordance
with Truth.²

Two things are at once clear from these extracts. The first is that an understanding of the meaning of salvation is equated with an understanding of what Nanak calls 'the Truth' (*sach* or *sachiārā*). The second is that the actual attainment of salvation depends not merely on an understanding of the Truth but inescapably on a way of life which gives expression to that understanding. One must walk according to the divine Order (the *hukam*); one must act 'in accordance with Truth'.

An essential aspect of 'living in accordance with Truth' is, as Nanak makes abundantly clear, a discipline of regular meditation (*nām simran*) designed to bring the devotee into a condition of total harmony with God. It would, however, be altogether wrong to represent the discipline of *nām simran* as a sufficient means of salvation, if by that we understand an exclusively interior practice. For Nanak the all-important practice of meditation was clearly meaningless if it failed to find a corresponding expression in all aspects of human life. The interior discipline may be the root and foundation of the way of salvation propounded by Nanak, but plainly there was no notion that salvation could be achieved exclusively in this manner. It is, Nanak insisted, a discipline to be practised in this world, not in a condition of total renunciation; and if authentic, it must be seen to overflow in deeds which give outward expression to the inward apprehension of the Truth. It must be a remembrance of God *mani, bach, karamī karakai*—in thought, word, and deed.

¹ *Ādi Granth*, 1. The *Ādi Granth* (First *Granth*) is the same as the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. It is customary to use the shorter form in footnote citations.

² *Ib.*, 62.

For Nanak a life of positive virtue is thus an integral part of the individual's pilgrimage towards that perfect harmony with God which is salvation. Every man is assailed by five enemies, by five evil impulses which if they prevail must deflect him from the way of salvation. These are lust, anger, covetousness, attachment to worldly things, and pride. Persistently they assault him and only if he places his trust in the divine Guru can he hope to overcome them. By the Guru's grace he follows the discipline of *nām simran*, of meditation on the divine Name of God, and thus assumes a pattern of life which humanly expresses the divine. In this manner he progressively abandons all that earns an evil *karma* and which in consequence binds him to the wheel of transmigration.

If the mind be defiled by sin it is cleansed with love of the Name. Virtue and sin are not mere words, for we carry with us the influence of what we have done. As you have sown so will you reap, and in accordance with the divine Order you will transmigrate.³

Expressed in such terms this may sound like a narrowly personal ethic, one concerned essentially with the individual's own welfare rather than with anything resembling a duty towards others. Elsewhere Nanak makes it clear that the virtue of which he speaks is one which must find expression in one's behaviour towards others as well as in the practice of private devotion to God. The two are inextricably linked. This is evident from yet another of the passages which hold a special place in Sikh affections, a brief composition which Nanak evidently addressed to a Muslim audience.

Make mercy your mosque, faith your prayer-mat,
and righteousness your Qur'an.
Make humility your circumcision, uprightness
your fasting, and so you shall be a
true Muslim.
Make good works your Ka'bah, Truth your pir,
and compassion your creed and your
prayer.
Make the performance of what pleases God
your rosary and, Nanak, he will
uphold your honour.⁴

The way of true religion must accordingly be a life both of inward devotion and of outward charity to all men. This was the teaching imparted to his followers, transmitted by his successors, and incorporated in the holy scripture at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The hagiographic narratives of the life of Nanak which flourished during that century (the *janam-sākhīs*) retain its essential features and consistently represent Nanak himself as one supremely compassionate towards

³ *Ib.*, 4.

⁴ *Ib.*, 140-141.

all men of whatever faith or status. In these narratives the poor are succoured, the cruel and hypocritical denounced, the proud chastened and then forgiven. One important cycle of stories reduces the teachings of Nanak to a threefold slogan: *nām, dān, isnān* ('the Name, charity, and purity'). True religion, in other words, embraces the discipline of inward meditation, the duty of charity towards others, and for oneself the obligation to remain unspotted.

The tradition so succinctly expressed in this slogan has never been abandoned and even if some Sikhs might own an inability to live up to its requirements none would ever tolerate the slightest hint of disrespect for Guru Nanak or for any of his teachings. And yet, as we have already observed, there is much in contemporary Sikh practice that suggests no evident connection with those teachings. It is to the Sikh experience of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that we must turn for an explanation.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were for the Punjab a period of increasing turbulence and none was more affected than the Sikhs. During the seventeenth century, when the community was still under the personal leadership of the Gurus, their difficulties largely derived from a growing hostility on the part of the Mughal authorities of the province. Early in the century the sixth Guru, Hargobind, invoked a policy of militant defence and in three skirmishes his followers defeated Mughal detachments. His successor withdrew to the Himalayan foothills and a lull lasting several decades resulted. Hostilities were, however, renewed late in the century and issued in open war between Sikh and Mughal during the period of the tenth and last Guru, Gobind Singh.

It was evidently in response to this condition of mounting hostility that Guru Gobind Singh inaugurated the famous brotherhood of the Khalsa in 1699. To this critical event are traced most of the features associated with the later community's distinctive code of ethics. Needless to say many of them must have been observed prior to 1699. Moreover, the code was certainly strengthened and in some measure augmented by the even greater turbulence of the eighteenth century. It was, however, the decision of the tenth Guru which incorporated these observances in a formal code, sealed with a rite of baptism and protected by sanctions directed against any who might subsequently violate the code.

The code is known as the *rahit* and the recorded versions which appear during the eighteenth century are the *rahit-nāme* to which reference was made above. The confusion and warfare which characterized eighteenth-century Punjab served

only to strengthen the cohesion of the community and its loyalty to the martial ethic incorporated in the *rahit*. From a comparatively small religious following the community rose through persecution, persistent defence, and ultimate triumph to dominance within the Punjab. This reached its peak during the first three decades of the nineteenth century when Maharaja Ranjit Singh ruled a strong and unified Punjab in the name of the Khalsa. Success, however, bred decay and during this period there was a visible decline from strict observance of the *rahit*.

The process was far advanced when eventually it was arrested during the last quarter of the century by the rise of the Singh Sabha movement. The Singh Sabha's call to revive the pristine glory of the Khalsa achieved a considerable success. In accordance with its preaching many descendants of the Khalsa returned to a stricter observance of the *rahit* and many more who had previously had no tradition of belonging to the community entered the brotherhood and accepted its discipline. This latter group included substantial numbers of outcasts. One section of these outcasts earned for itself the name of Rahitiya by its particularly careful observance of the *rahit*.

The Singh Sabha movement considerably strengthened the Sikh community's loyalty to the Khalsa *rahit* and ever since there have been few prepared to question the claim that observance of the *rahit* is a fundamental aspect of Sikh orthodoxy. Within the community the only expression of dissent has been on behalf of the so-called *sahaj-dhārī* Sikhs, those who claim to reverence the teachings of the Gurus as recorded in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* but who do not observe the *rahit* in its fulness (particularly the injunctions concerning uncut hair and other outer insignia). There is no means of defining nor of enumerating this group and there is little evidence to suggest that the belief which it represents has ever achieved a substantial following in modern times. The strictly orthodox refuse to regard them as true Sikhs. Others tolerate their assumption of the label on the understanding that their beliefs fall short of an ideal towards which they are supposed to be striving. They are, however, in a category entirely different from those who having once accepted the *rahit* subsequently abandon it. Whereas the *sahaj-dhārī* is normally regarded as devout and sincere, the Khalsa Sikh who cuts his hair or takes up smoking is branded a *patit* (lit. 'fallen', apostate) and is regarded with much greater concern.

We turn now to the actual content of the *rahit* as understood and promulgated at the present time. For this purpose we shall largely rely on the current version of the *rahit* compiled and issued by

the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee of Amritsar.⁶ Much of this document, the *Sikh Rahit Maryādā*, deals with devotional practice and Sikh ceremonies. At only one point does it specifically take up ethical obligation. There are, however, numerous precepts dispersed throughout the entire work (particularly in the section dealing with the ceremony of baptism) and these we shall now examine.

It is in the baptismal section that we find the instructions dealing with that best known of all Sikh beliefs, the insignia of the Khalsa. All who accept baptism must swear to wear thereafter the famous *pañj kakke*, or 'Five K's'. These are the *kesh* (uncut hair), *kanghā* (a comb to bind the *kesh*), *kirpān* (dagger), *karā* (steel bangle), and *kachh* or *kachhahirā* (pants which must not reach below the knee). For all who wish to enter the Khalsa, both men and women, this promise is imperative, and to refrain thereafter from wearing any one of the five technically renders the offender a *patit*.

The actual origins of the 'Five K's' are variously explained and it would be impossible to attempt even a summary analysis of the conflicting theories which have been offered. This is perhaps unfortunate in that the problem of contemporary observance must relate intimately to the question of antecedents. We must, however, content ourselves with recognizing the existence of a contemporary problem, an issue which is seen by many as a serious threat to the strength and cohesion of the community.

In the case of the *karā* and the *kachh* (which may be worn as an undergarment) there are no difficulties and the impediment which some evidently experience in wearing the standard dagger is commonly overcome by using a comb which has attached to it a miniature dagger measuring less than a centimetre in length. It is the uncut hair, and its attendant comb, which provides the modern Sikh with his greatest test, particularly when he moves away from the Punjab. For some the problem is evidently one of simple inconvenience. Others apparently regard it as a source of embarrassment and amongst those who reside in the United Kingdom there has been the experience of positive discrimination. In some instances the remedy is a surreptitious trimming of hair and

beard. For others it has been regular cutting and shaving. This, as we have already seen, is treated as flagrant violation of the *rahit*. The turban is an aspect of the same problem. Whereas the early *rahit-nāme* do not specifically require it, the turban possesses an obvious convenience and the modern *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* makes it mandatory.

The loyal Sikh, particularly the male, can thus be recognized by his outward appearance. He will also be distinguished by his observance of certain prohibitions detailed in the *rahit*. Some of these are predictable, aimed at the kind of practices which most theories of social order would unhesitatingly proscribe. These include theft and adultery. Others, which some might be concerned to dispute, extend to gambling and the consumption of intoxicants. This is the *rahit's* weakest point in terms of actual observance. Although the decree against intoxicants is explicit it has shown no sign of seriously affecting an interest in hard liquor retained by many rural Punjabis. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the same injunction which has achieved the greatest success. The ban on intoxicants covers not merely drugs and alcohol but also tobacco, and this particular feature of the *rahit* is generally observed. Tobacco is highly offensive to Sikhs and any sensitive person who respects their feelings can be well advised to refrain from smoking in their presence. Once again the antecedents of the decree may be obscure, but of its present acceptance there can be no doubt.

Two more prohibitions deserve special mention. Although the Sikh is not required to be a vegetarian the contemporary *rahit* (following its eighteenth-century models) prohibits the consumption of animal flesh slaughtered according to Muslim rites. If the strict letter of the *rahit* is to be followed meat may be consumed only if the animal is killed with a single blow. Fortunately most abattoirs follow this practice for reasons of convenience and the issue is no longer a live one. The final prohibition to be noted is the ban on piercing one's skin (either ear or nose) for ornaments. The reason, as with so much else in the *rahit*, appears to be the need to distinguish Sikhs from others.

Although this catalogue of proscribed practices has been comparatively long it would be a mistake to see in it the essence of the Sikh ethic. It certainly lends an outward distinctiveness to the community, but covers only a portion of the Sikh's obligation. To the visible insignia and the list of prohibitions the *rahit* adds four positive duties. These are honest labour, charity, service, and equality.

The first two duties are conveniently expressed by yet another popular quotation from the works of Nanak.

⁶ The body elected by all Sikhs in the Punjab to administer the gurdwaras (temples). The translations incorporated in the remainder of this article are taken from the authorized Punjabi version *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* (Amritsar: S.G.P.C., 1950) and for this reason page references are not given. In all instances, however, the relevant passage can be easily located in the English translation *A Guide to the Sikh Way of Life* to which reference is made above and under 'Further Reading'.

He who eats by his own labours and
bestows a portion on others,
He, Nanak, is the one who knows the Way.⁶

It is claimed that one will never find a Sikh beggar, and that if a beggar offers the appearance of a Sikh it can be no more than a pretence. The obligation to perform acts of charity is neatly expressed by the *Sikh Rahit Maryādā*: 'The Guru's Sikh will regard the poor man's mouth as a charity-box'.

'Service' is used to translate the Punjabi word *sevā*, a concept more carefully defined than the characteristically loose usage of the English term. The Sikh's first and primary *sevā* is towards the gurdwara, or temple, where he may be expected to perform menial tasks of sweeping, carrying water for thirsty worshippers, and providing free labour in the gurdwara's kitchen. It is not, however, a selfish notion, limiting its benefits to Sikhs and their exclusive place of worship. Gurdwaras are open to all and the *rahit* explicitly requires that *sevā* should be shown towards any who may visit them. Detailed explanations of the concept will sometimes interpret the gurdwara as a school wherein *sevā* is learnt in order that it may be practised in the world.

The insistence that *sevā* is for all men brings us to the final affirmation, that of equality. The Golden Temple in Amritsar has four doors facing the four points of the compass and this feature is commonly held to symbolize the openness of the gurdwara to everyone of whatever creed, status, sex or race. Nanak denied the importance of both confessional and caste distinctions, and affirmed the essential equality of men and women. The modern *rahit* incorporates this ideal.

It is at this point, however, that an objection is sometimes entered. Caste, some maintain, may be rejected in theory but certainly not in practice. Although it would be idle to pretend that modern Sikhs take no account of caste it would be false to suggest that this necessarily involves disloyalty to the intention of the Guru or violation of any basic human right. Caste in itself is not necessarily harmful. On the contrary, it can be argued that in terms of stability Indian society compares favourably with that of the West precisely because it continues to sustain caste as the basis of marital alliance and family loyalties. It is discrimination

based upon caste that constitutes the real objection and this the *rahit* most firmly rejects. Moreover, it requires the observance of commensal practices which strike directly at the heart of caste discrimination. At baptism all drink from the same bowl, in the gurdwara all receive the same sacramental food, and in its kitchen all must sit together.

Contemporary marriage practices provide a clear indication of current attitudes towards caste. The *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* declares that 'marriages of male and female Sikhs should be conducted without reference to caste or sub-caste'. This is rarely observed and to this extent it may be held that the *rahit* is violated. Alternatively, it can be maintained that the *rahit* has here misinterpreted the intention of the Gurus, a theory which derives some support from the fact that all ten Gurus married in accordance with caste prescriptions. Controversy may be acknowledged at this point but not within the actual bonds of marriage. Sikh women possess rights which impart protection during earlier years and considerable authority at a later age. As far as religious observances are concerned there is total equality. Women are as free as men to exercise religious functions and they commonly do so.

No one needs to be reminded that ideals are ideals and that no community of mankind has ever demonstrated a perfect fulfilment of whatever standards it proclaims. Sikhs would freely acknowledge this to be true in their own case. With equal emphasis, however, they would maintain both the truth of their own beliefs and the rights of other men to follow different paths. Sikhs are clear in terms of what they believe to be right conduct. Equally they are tolerant towards others who share the same tolerance.

Further Reading

The only substantial work dealing directly with Sikh ethics is Avtar Singh, *Ethics of the Sikhs* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1970). It is concerned with the ethical teachings of the Gurus, not with contemporary Sikh practice. For the contemporary requirement see *A Guide to the Sikh Way of Life*, available for 10p (plus postage) from Pam's Sikh Bookshop, 38 Gloucester Circus, London, SE10.

⁶ *Adi Granth*, 1245.